



Partnership for Innovation in Education

Mary Welsh Schlueter
Chief Executive
P.O. Box 8722
Cincinnati, OH 45208
mary@piemedia.org
513.378.8370

CINCINNATI ART MUSEUM

This case is written by the Partnership for Innovation in Education with Sands Montessori Elementary School students. This format is based upon the Case Method. ©2015

Mary Claire Angle is being asked by the Museum's Chief Curator to develop a new art space for a "pop up" exhibit, and she doesn't have many options in the historic museum. Can you help her fulfill this assignment?

Situation

While she sat in the Cincinnati Art Museum café, Mary Claire sipped her coffee very slowly. She was trying to concentrate, and it was very early. It would be hours before school children would stare at the Egyptian mummies, elegant lapis-blue Chihuly glass chandelier or the Gainsborough portrait near the museum's entrance. She was hoping the solitude would help her think.

She had a tricky challenge to consider, and the early morning quiet seemed almost ghostly. Putting her coffee cup down, she looked at the abstract Joan Miro mural facing the café. The child-like primary colors and black curlicues made her smile. Leaving the café, she turned the corner, and walked into an exhibit space behind the large work of art. She had yet to come up with the solution to the challenge.

Standing in Galleries 124 and 125, she looked at the space. She turned 360 degrees and noticed that the space was small and irregularly shaped. And it was currently very empty. It was a tougher space to house an exhibition, especially since it was directly across from the noisy café and hallway foot traffic.

"It's not very spacious," she said aloud to no one as she walked through in a slow cadence, her heels echoing in the room. "But," she added suddenly, and in a full voice that surprised even her, "it *will* work."

She felt better immediately. CAM's Chief Curator had asked Mary Claire to help solve an exhibition logistics problem the day before. The curator had asked

Mary Claire to develop a new space featuring Cincinnati artists, and she wanted a plan of action in 3 days to establish a quick exhibition for the summer. Mary Claire decided Galleries 124 and 125 would be the perfect space for this new “pop up” art of Cincinnati exhibition. Of course, she didn’t have much choice: All the best gallery spaces had been promised to CAM curators months ago. Mary Claire could only choose from museum hallways and other “in between” places. This little space would have to do.

Without the luxury of a large space to design her exhibition, the art of Cincinnati would just have to fit into the smaller “swing” space.

But how could she put this together so quickly?

Mary Claire’s thoughts raced. She remembered again the excited feeling she experienced when someone presented her with a challenge. She could do it! She always just tackled the problem, bit-by-bit and the process always worked for her.

Now that her project had some direction, questions flooded her mind. The space was an odd shape, so she felt some concern about how she would create a thought-provoking and educational exhibition.

Mary Claire knew she would need to get advice from others, including the museum’s Chief Curator, conservators, and the exhibition team. She hurried past the Miro mural, and climbed the stunning Tiffany staircase, lost in thought, planning for her afternoon meeting with the exhibition team.

Background and History

The Cincinnati Art Museum (CAM) aims to bring people and art together (CAM’s mission). The art museum reaches viewers all over the globe. From its museum headquarters in Cincinnati, OH, to 24/7 web access to its digital art collection through their website and the Google Art Project, the CAM influences the access and interpretation of art throughout the world.

At Eden Park, overlooking the Ohio River, The Cincinnati Art Museum has an extensive art collection of more than 65,000 works that span 6,000 years! And each year, in addition to showcasing its own collection, the art museum hosts several national and international traveling exhibitions.

The Cincinnati Art Museum traces its history back to the late nineteenth century, when public art museums were still very much a new phenomenon – especially as far west as Cincinnati. Forget about California! Cincinnati was considered on the edge of the western frontier as settlers advanced from Atlantic seaboard cities like New York City, Philadelphia, Boston and Baltimore.

After the success of the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, the Women’s Art Museum Association organized a chapter of their members in

Cincinnati, committed to bring an arts institution to the bustling -- and increasingly wealthy -- city along the Ohio River.

Enthusiasm grew such that by 1881 the Cincinnati Museum Association was incorporated and only five years later, in May 1886, a permanent art museum building was finished in Eden Park. It was heralded worldwide as “The Art Palace of the West.”

With generous donations from prominent Cincinnatians, the collection grew to the tens of thousands of objects, making the first of several Art Museum expansions necessary.

Today the art museum is sustained through the generosity of individuals, arts councils and businesses that care about the region’s cultural enrichment, educational excellence and economic growth.

The Cincinnati Art Museum

The Cincinnati Art Museum offers art that everyone can experience. Any patron can walk the historic “bricks and mortar” museum, and see “up-close” works of art from the permanent collection and special exhibitions. Or if you can’t visit the historic Federal-style building overlooking the Ohio River and “Seven Hills” of Cincinnati, you can experience the digital works from CAM’s permanent collection online through their website and the Google Art Project, and become a novice art expert in minutes!

Competition

Cincinnati has a rich history in supporting fine art and music organizations. The CAM’s closest contemporaries are the Taft Museum of Art and the Contemporary Arts Center, both of which feature different genres and historical periods than the larger and more comprehensive CAM collection. Like most American museums, the CAM is funded with both private and public monies.

The Art Exhibition

Mary Claire has asked that you help solve her dilemma: Create a compelling art exhibit in a transitional, oddly shaped space, near the noisy CAM Café. Many decisions will have to be made, including the exhibition concept itself.

1) What hanging format will be used?

Mary Claire has already decided that the exhibition will feature Cincinnati artists and their work. Students will be expected to look at similar exhibition spaces in global art museums, such as the Guggenheim, Louvre, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Balboa and Frick Museums, to study how exhibitions are designed and works of art are displayed in unusual spaces. Historically, do museums feature and display art with different viewing space concerns? What is the typical viewing dimension for wall art (2D) vs. sculpture (3D), and how does security play a role in protecting these works of art?

2) How will we communicate Cincinnati's art history, and who will view it?

Students will choose many or several Cincinnati works of art to feature in this exhibition. But what kind of theme will be used, and what should be the exhibition's name? Is it history-based, landscape vs. portrait paintings or does it feature one extremely well known local art company, such as the famous Rookwood Pottery and their artisans? What types of viewers should the exhibition attract? Are we positioning the exhibition for those viewers, and how do we know these are the best patrons to target? Who do we expect will attend our exhibition?

3) How do we talk about the exhibition? What kinds of words do we use?

Mary Claire would like you to think about how we want to talk about this exhibition, what text would you use to describe the exhibition, and how would you use these descriptions in the exhibition itself? Would you want to develop an audiobook to guide the viewer, and what work of art do you think a digital "docent" (volunteer museum educator) like to discuss on the tape?

4) How should we communicate best with patrons as they view the exhibition?

What words or images should guide visitors through the exhibition? Should there be information panels for each work of art, plus a descriptive panel sharing a historical review of the exhibition's contents? Should all Cincinnati artists be on display for a general review, or should a more specific topic or theme be covered. How many topics or themes are best, and how do other Museums use small spaces effectively? How is color used to attract the viewer, as they rush past the exhibit, to have lunch at the Café? How is color used to complement the works of art on display? How should the gallery lighting highlight the dimensionality of the works of art, and move the viewer through the exhibit?

5) Which artwork can we choose?

Mary Claire knows you need to see her museum's artwork to design the exhibition. That's why she's offering you a chance to view a portion of CAM's permanent collection via the Google Art Project, the online catalogue of the museum's works of art and objects. Go to <http://www.cincinnatiartmuseum.org/share/connect/press-room/252-toulouse-lautrec> AND <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/u/0/collection/cincinnati-art-museum?projectId=art-project>

Choosing the installation format, topic, theme and primary wording to describe the exhibition in Galleries 124 and 125 will require you know the gallery dimensions. Plus you will need to know how other museum across the world display art differently. One way, for instance, spaces art out on the walls to include a good deal of white space, while the salon style more typically considered to be European, is more dense, covering walls from floor to ceiling with paintings and artworks in an opulent manner. Which will you choose and why?

The Physical Space: Maneuverability

There are a few “housekeeping” rules in developing an art exhibition space. First, curators must chart out the patrons’ walking or viewing path in the galleries of the exhibition. In other words, they need to figure out how their patrons will move around the gallery space. They answer questions like:

- What is the traffic path of your patrons? How many inches from the artwork do you need so that patrons don’t harm the paintings or sculptures?
- How do we measure the exhibition space so that the works of art have premium viewing, but also won’t impede foot traffic or cause injury or harm to patrons?
- In addition, with the noise of the Café, will we want music to play in the Galleries, and if so, how will it complement the exhibition theme?

Mary Claire is counting on your help to get this right! She wants her visitors to enjoy the exhibition with all five senses, while also keeping the art and the viewers safe!

Safety for People *and* Art

Second, curators and conservators are concerned not only for its visitors’ safety, but for also keeping the valuable art in pristine “perfect” condition. Works of art aren’t always in great condition when museums “discover” them. Many works of historical and ancient art may have been salvaged from poor storage conditions, and museums aim to protect and restore works of art as best they can.

As exhibition designers, you must pay special attention to how to protect the works of art while it is on view. For instance, they are expected to answer questions like:

- What temperature do we need to maintain in the exhibition.
- Will humidity and sunlight affect the art displayed?
- How will we light the exhibition as we do not want to fade the art?
- What materials were used to create the art and can they sustain damage?

As a rule, too much natural light entering the space can damage the art, fading it over time. Synthetic lighting, creative exhibition planning and positioning the art properly are key pieces of designing an exhibition.

Model Design

After curators and exhibition designers develop a rough draft of the exhibition space, they recreate it with a small-scale model using high-resolution photos of the art, foam core, clay, and/or other art materials to recreate the galleries.

Sometimes, the exhibition space can change physically, especially if a curator or conservator believes windows, lighting, walls or walk-through spaces can be changed with little expense. If you could change the CAM exhibition space, what two devices or space changes would you make?

Remember, as an exhibition designer, you have one primary goal: Keep your visitor interested by delivering a memorable learning experience. In *kid speak*, that means your exhibition has to be both easy to understand and fun to view. But how can you discover their reaction to your exhibition? Ask them! Here are some examples of how you might get their point of view...

- Develop a digital way to rate the exhibition, and gather comments
- Use Social Media and develop a digital “thumbs up/thumbs down” rating system in the gallery space
- Create a docent training program just for kids

Finally, think like a museum curator, exhibition designer, conservator and educator: What opportunities are available for you to guarantee a first-rate learning experience only available at your museum, with your exhibition? How can you involve patrons outside of Cincinnati?

QUESTIONS TO BE RESEARCHED:

Review some of the questions already noted in this case. Here’s a sampling of key challenges:

- Gallery size. Remember Mary Claire’s words, “It’s not very spacious,” The measurements you have to launch your exhibit will be provided by your teacher.
- What should the exhibition’s focus be? What will it be named?
- What works of art should be included in the exhibition, and how should they be displayed? Should the installation be salon style (floor-to-ceiling) or styled with significant space between works of art.
- How can we be sure to accommodate wheelchairs and strollers? How will the foot traffic move through the exhibit?
- How much text should we include for the overall exhibition, and what will it be?
- Who do we expect will be our market for this exhibition? Should there be interactive options for all types of viewers, including children?

The Problem:

Using the CAM art collection, we are asking you to use your analytical skills to help Mary Claire solve her challenge. You'll be using concepts typically taught in Science, Engineering, Math and Technology classes.

Using this case, you have the chance to:

- Perform art and museum research using classroom technology
- Develop research questionnaires allowing better understanding of viewers
- Create miniature 3-D models of exhibition space, using digital tools
- Maximize viewing space using appropriate dimensions in the exhibition viewing areas
- Present finished design to patrons with digital and 3-D samples

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